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WASHINGTON — The Carter Administration did not disclose a statement in which Fidel Castro said he tried to head off the recent rebel attack in Zaire because it did not believe that Castro was telling the truth, Senate sources said.

The sources said the Cuban leader informed the United States four days after the Katangan rebels invaded Zaire's Shaba province that he had prior knowledge of the May 13 attack and tried to head it off.

The sequence of events appears to support President Carter's claim that Cuba was aware of the invasion plans, but it casts doubt on Carter's

allegations that the Cubans did nothing to prevent the attack.

Deputy White House Press Secretary Rex Granum declined yesterday to comment on the matter. Mary Ann Bader, a State Department spokesman, said, "It is not our practice to comment on diplomatic exchanges."

Castro made his comments on May 17 to Lyle F. Lane, the top U.S. diplomat in Havana, who relayed them to the State Department in a secret cable, sources said Saturday night.

The sources, who asked not to be named, said that CIA Director Stansfield Turner confirmed the contents of the cable after Sen. George S. McGovern (D, S.D.) read a copy of it to

Castro statement

a closed meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Friday.

The sources quoted Turner as saying that the cable had not been disclosed publicly because Carter Administration officials did not believe Castro was telling the truth.

President Carter charged on May 25 that Cuba and Angola shared responsibility for the attack, saying at a news conference:

"We believe that Cuba had known of the Katangan plan to invade and obviously did nothing to restrain them from crossing the border."

Castro claimed that after learning early in April of the impending invasion, he tried to persuade the Angolan government of President Agostino Neto to stop it, the sources said. But Castro was unsuccessful, they said,

partly because Neto was ill and was staying in the Soviet Union.

On May 13, the rebel Katangans captured the copper-mining city of Kolwezi and killed hundreds of black and white civilians. The rebels eventually were dislodged from Kolwezi and driven back into Angola by a combined force of French, Belgian and Zairean troops who received U.S. logistical support.

Sen. Dick Clark (D., Iowa), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Africa, referred to the cable in a telephone interview Saturday night.

"The thing that I find disturbing is that the President didn't bring it out and let the Congress and public decide (on Castro's truthfulness)," Clark said.